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POST-COVID-19,

REIMAGINING THE WORKPLACE

BY AMIT PATEL
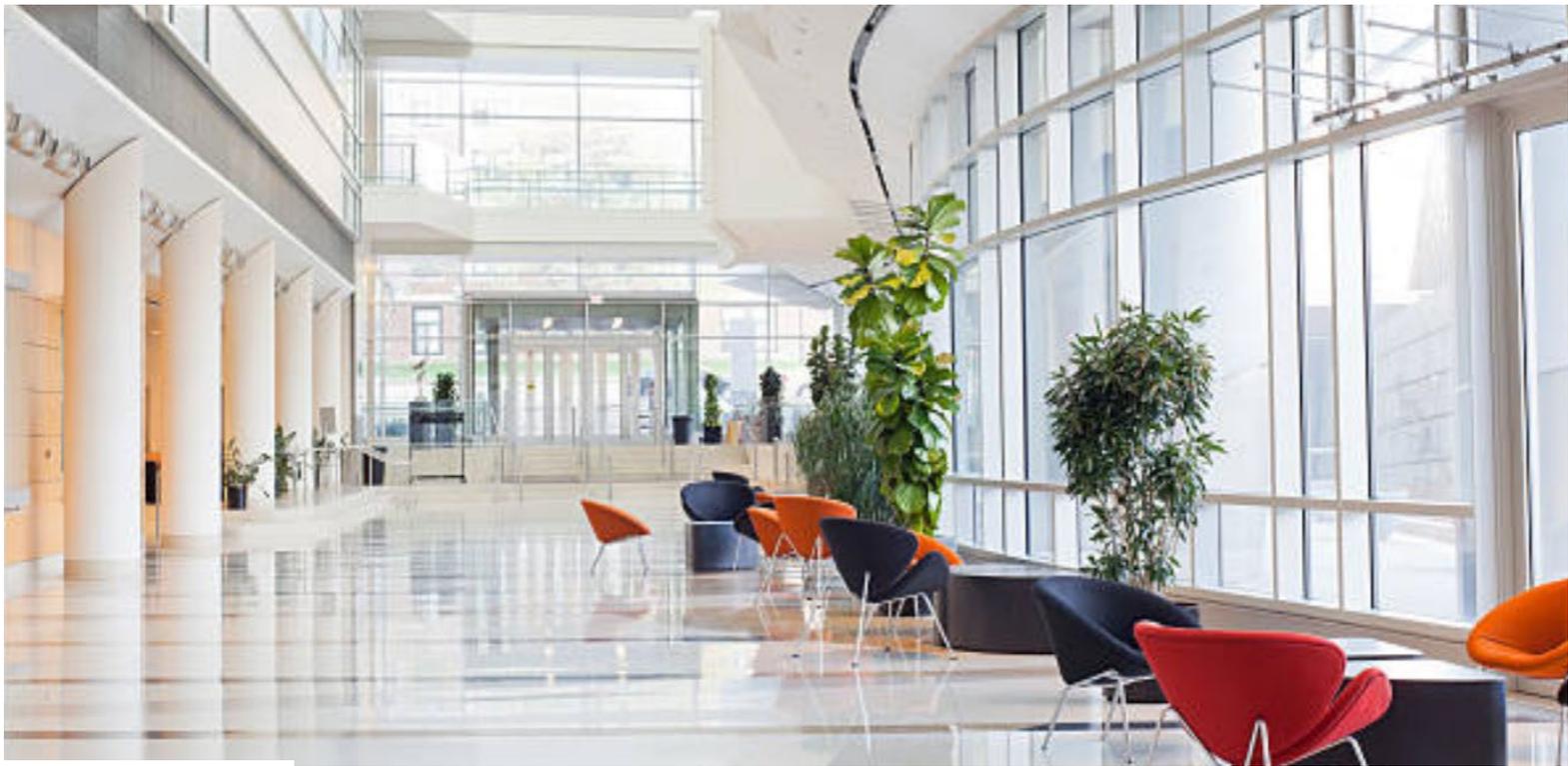
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Photo courtesy: Getty Images

POST-COVID-19, REIMAGINING THE WORKPLACE

By Amit Patel

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a global humanitarian and economic crisis. Organizations are faced with an unprecedented disruption to their businesses, and as they plan to gradually reopen, they first need to imagine a "new workplace normal," post COVID-19.

This paper provides pragmatic and actionable insights on what lies ahead With diligent planning and significant change management, organizations have the opportunity to create a "new workplace normal" that emphasizes employee wellbeing and maintains their corporate culture, while increasing workplace flexibility.

> *"To fear change is to fear to be challenged. To fear being challenged is to fear growth and new opportunities."*
>
> *Ty Howard*

INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented massive economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the world's workforce of 3.2 billion people.

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) report published in April 2020, "the COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated in terms of intensity and expanded its global reach. Full or partial lockdown measures are now affecting almost 2.7 billion workers, representing around 81 percent of the world's workforce."[1] This translates to more than four out of every five employees affected by the lockdowns and stay at home orders. [2]

Countries across the world are making their way towards relaxing COVID-19 lockdowns and a conscientious effort to return to some form of normalcy – and the creation of a new normal. To adapt to the new normal across industries, organizations will have to reimagine how work gets done, and the role of the office.

There is a lot of speculation and conjecture on what the new normal will look like, but, there is little doubt that a new normal will emerge, rather than a return to how things were. This presents organizations with an opportunity to proactively reimagine their workspace – to make it even better than what it was before the COVID-19 crisis. How seamlessly organizations handle this transition will define their success and brand for years to come.

> *"Workers and businesses are facing catastrophe, in both developed and developing economies … We have to move fast, decisively, and together. The right urgency, measures, could make the difference between survival and collapse."*
>
> *Guy Ryder, ILO Director-General*

Reimagining, redesigning, and reconfiguring the existing workplace to create a vibrant, safe, and productive work environment will require diligent planning and significant change management.

As organizations begin to develop strategies to reopen their workplace, we recommend they consider the following four key elements.
1. Redesign the workplace for safety
2. Reimagine and reconstruct how work is done
3. Who do we bring back onsite and when?
4. Rethink and refine operations

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[1] "ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Second edition", International Labor Organization, April 07, 2020
[2] "COVID-19 causes devastating losses in working hours and employment", International Labor Organization, April 07, 2020

1. REDESIGN THE WORKPLACE FOR SAFETY

Organizations reopening their businesses are faced with complex challenges. Offices, factories, and distribution centers that are accustomed to bringing hundreds, if not thousands, of people on-site will need to reimagine their existing workplace design, with safety a top priority.

Here are a few important things companies should be thinking about as they redesign their workplace:

Photo courtesy: Getty Images

The health and safety of the workforce should be top priority

Distributed Offices
Organizations should consider moving from a concentrated "centralized" office model to a distributed "hub and spoke" office model. Moving the offices closer to where employees live will reduce their potential usage of crowded public transport and exposure to infectious viruses. Having small groups of people working collaboratively would address the need for connections and improved mental health while minimizing the risks of widespread exposure.

Office Design Layout
Organizations must redesign their workspace to support organizational priorities, promote interactions that cannot happen remotely using digital technologies, and ensure social distancing. The new workplace should incorporate design changes such as moving cubicles further apart, installing plexiglass barriers, creating small private offices and huddle rooms, reconfiguring conference rooms, and repurposing open workspaces.

Organizations should also emphasize hygiene in their redesign efforts. Some organizations may have to retrofit their office buildings' main entrance with automatic doors, bathrooms with touchless soap, and paper dispensers, and potentially upgrade their air filtration system to use ultraviolet light and HEPA filters.

Incorporate New Emerging Technologies
The workplace of the future should incorporate new and emerging technologies as part of its office design layout. A few examples include:
- Temperature sensors installed under employees' desks and in open public spaces to continuously monitor employee temperatures. When an employee's temperature is out of range, it sends an alert to the designated HR representative.
- Employee tracking software to reduce floor space crowding
- Conference rooms equipped with always-on video conferencing for seamless collaboration

2. REIMAGINE AND RECONSTRUCT HOW WORK IS DONE

The COVID-19 crisis has prompted organizations to reassess how work gets done. By examining each process – what is being done, how is it being done, where is it being done, and when is it being done, an organization can make refinements to reduce operating costs and increase efficiencies, while keeping the organizational culture intact. Here are a few important things organizations should be thinking about as they reimagine and reconstruct how work is done:

Photo courtesy: Getty Images

Seamless digital transformation and collaboration is key

Digital Transformation
COVID-19 has illuminated that the future of many businesses is primarily digital.

Organizations need to evaluate what on-site manual business processes can be streamlined and automated using digital technologies.

Business operations and customer experience can improve significantly by using digital technologies such as big data analysis (BDA), business intelligence (BI), artificial intelligence (AI), and the internet of things (IoT).

For example, Anheuser-Busch (AB) InBev, is leveraging IoT, to create "connected breweries" capable of monitoring the quantity, quality, temperature, and other traits in each batch of brew.[3]

Remote Work
There is little doubt that remote work will become the new norm. The April 2020, Gartner CFO survey reveals 74% intend to shift some employees to remote work permanently. FlexJobs' annual survey in 2019 found that **65% of professionals think they would be more productive working remotely.** Some of the key benefits of remote work are providing employees flexibility, improving productivity, and reducing the carbon footprint (due to reduced travel to and from the office).

Upskilling and New Career Paths
Digital transformation and increased remote work will require organizations to upskill their employees. For example, organizations may have to develop training programs to help employees use digital technologies such as Zoom for video conferencing, Conceptboard for whiteboarding, etc. Organizations will have to redesign career frameworks that enable their employees to leverage their new digital skills to grow and thrive in the new normal.

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[3] Clint Boulton, "6 digital transformation success stories", CIO, January 13, 2020

3. WHO DO WE BRING BACK ONSITE AND WHEN?

Organizations are faced with a tremendous business challenge of ramping up to full productivity post-COVID-19. Some roles will evolve and may transition into virtual ones, while other roles rely heavily on onsite technologies and can't be done effectively without them. By identifying their mission-critical roles, organizations will be able to identify who to bring back onsite and when.

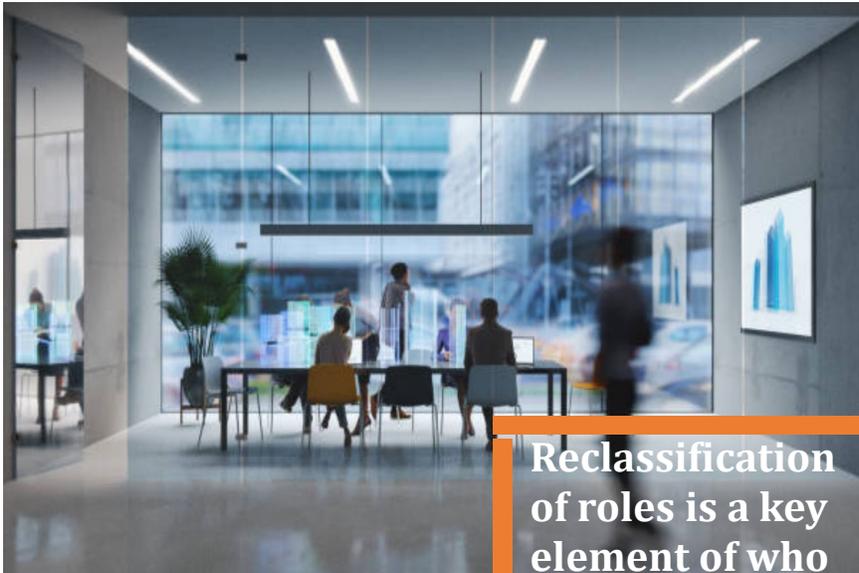Listed below are a few essential considerations to ensure a successful transition back to work:

Photo courtesy: Getty Images

Reclassification of roles is a key element of who returns to work and when

Establish a Multi-Disciplinary Team
Organizations should establish a multi-disciplinary team to develop a return to work strategy. The team composition should include senior leaders from key functions and employee representatives. This multi-disciplinary team is responsible for developing, implementing, and monitoring the developed return to work plan.

It may benefit the organization to hire external advisors to bring innovative ideas, subject matter expertise, and best practices to develop an actionable and pragmatic work plan.

Reclassification of Roles
The organization's multi-disciplinary team should carefully evaluate who needs to return to the workplace based on their role (what they do) and the value created by where the role is performed (could the same value be derived by performing the role remotely?). The existing employee roles should be reclassified into one of the following three groups:
▶ Fully onsite
▶ Hybrid (a combination of some onsite and some remote)
▶ Fully remote

Staggered Schedule and Rotational Days
As the organization is building its return to the workplace strategy, it should account for the volume of employees it is bringing in. Large volumes of employees returning to the workspace pose a significant risk for contracting and spreading the coronavirus. Organizations should create cross-functional teams that work on a staggered work schedule and rotational days. This will help in maintaining business continuity, balancing employee density in the workplace, and reducing risks of spreading the coronavirus.

4. RETHINK AND REFINE OPERATIONS

As organizations ready themselves to reopen, they must reassess, rethink, and refine their operations to increase safety, reduce their real estate footprint, decrease operating costs, and improve productivity.

We have identified a few considerations to help organizations reimagine their operations:

Photo courtesy: Getty Images

Reduction in real estate footprint will result in huge cost savings

New Safety Protocols
Before reopening, organizations must develop new public health and safety plans and procedures including a COVID-19 Infectious Diseases Preparedness Protection and Response Plan.

New onboarding programs must be developed to help employees with understanding the changes in safety procedures such as temperature checks, usage of masks and gloves, cleaning and disinfection of the workspace, etc.

Reduce Real Estate Footprint
Before COVID-19, organizations spent a significant amount of money on real-estate, by either leasing huge office spaces in prime locations or building large campuses. However, post-COVID-19 the real estate realities for an organization are going to be very different – they have an opportunity to rethink their real estate footprint, and transform the design of what office space they retain to serve specific organizational priorities.

Organizations leasing office space should renegotiate the lease and consider potentially off-loading unused office space. Those owning property should consider consolidating their office space and leasing or selling the excess unused office space.

By reducing their real estate footprint, organizations have an opportunity to dramatically reduce their operating cost.

Customer Interaction and Air Travel
The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the way organizations interact with their customers. Nowadays, most customer interactions are done virtually using digital technologies. Reduced air travel has resulted in noticeable cost savings. Moving forward, as travel restrictions are eased organizations must refine and formalize their new travel policies, striking an appropriate balance between in-person and virtual meetings.

SUMMARY

Organizations are faced with the daunting business task of navigating the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and shouldering the responsibility of creating a new post-COVID-19 normal. By making employee safety as a top priority, reimagining how work is done, redesigning the office, determining who works on-site, supporting virtual work, and embracing digital transformation, organizations can not only reinstill confidence in their employees but also build resiliency for any future disruptions.

The longer an organization waits, the more challenging it will become.

> *Are you ready to reimagine your workplace?*
> *The time is NOW!*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amit Patel is an accomplished and results-driven management consultant specializing in strategy, transformations, and executive leadership coaching. Amit has broad-based expertise in building and leading strategic global transformations resulting in cost savings, enhanced organizational efficiency, and improved productivity. Amit offers extensive experience working with Fortune 500 organizations, and start-ups.

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About Mythos Group

Mythos Groups is a management consulting firm. We partner with senior executives to solve complex issues across all industries and business functions.

From Fortune 500 companies to start-ups we collaborate with clients in formulating innovative strategies to design and implement impactful transformative business solutions.

Our home page is www.mythosgroupinc.com.

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